Rabbi Shimon Gruen

Torah Lessons for the Home

{ Shoftim 5780 }

Valid Concerns

Special Care and Attention

The Torah tells us this week about the pep talk that the Yidden received before going out to war with their enemies. In his talk, the Kohen strengthened them, calmed them down, and told them not to fear the tumult of the war because Hashem was right there with them.

At the end of the sermon, the Kohen added a caveat: "*If there are people amongst you who have recently built a new home which they have not yet inaugurated, they should return home to live in it.*" Why is that? "*Because in the event that he will die at war, someone else will get to move into his brand-new home*". "*And that*," Rashi adds, "*will cause them aggravation.*"

It's interesting to note that the people were about to set out on a holy mission. Each and every one of them was ready, willing, and able to make the ultimate sacrifice for the sake of Hashem. And yet, the Torah cared to mention the aggravation some people might experience about not being to enjoy their new homes; something that seems to be trivial in comparison to the bigger issues at play.

This teaches us such an important lesson to apply in the homes we are all in the process of "building". When something bothers one of our family members, whether it is a spouse or a child, we must take them seriously. Whether you think it trivial or not, and whether it gets in the way of something that you deem more important, you must put it all aside and validate their concerns.

Take It Seriously

When your spouse shares their fears, troubles, or concerns with you, don't dismiss them or belittle them. It's impossible to measure the importance of a feeling. You can't deny its existence or explain it away. To the person experiencing it, those feelings are as real as the light of day, and nothing you will say will convince them otherwise.

Trivializing someone else's feelings and telling them they're overreacting is very hurtful. It can make them feel like you think they're stupid for having these thoughts or fears and that you think less of them as a person.

It's important to mention that if those feelings are incessant or overbearing and interfere with the person's day to day life, it might be an indication of a mental disorder such as anxiety or OCD. Even so, these are real feelings to them and you should still validate them, even as you broach the idea that perhaps this needs professional intervention.

The Reason for Denial

You might feel compelled to deny or invalidate your spouse's concerns because you are afraid that otherwise you're obligated to come up with a solution to the problem. However, that reasoning is flawed for two reasons.

First, what makes you think that your spouse is intending for you to solve their problem? Very often, a person might just want to unburden themselves and have someone listen to their doubts and hear them out. Even if they seem to be asking for advice, they may not necessarily need you to fix it for them.

Second, when you validate their concerns and let them know that they were heard, it does not make you responsible. Even if they ask you for a solution, you can simply say that you don't have one.

The main thing is to give them the respect of listening to what they have to say. When your spouse feels comfortable telling you their deepest thoughts, it forges a stronger, deeper connection between the two of you. However, if you constantly give them the feeling that you don't have the time or patience to listen to them, they will become frustrated and look for other people to talk to.

Opposite Reactions

Some people have a habit of thinking that if something isn't important to them, it's not important at all. Just last week we learned that there's a prohibition in the Torah against eating blood. Rashi elaborates on this interesting law by saying that it could've been enacted due one of two two reasons. Either people at the time craved eating blood, and so this law needed to be established. Or, the Torah is seeking out additional ways to reward us, and if by not eating blood – which is repulsive to a majority of people – we get rewarded, it comes to show us how much more so we will be rewarded for refraining from indulging in foods or actions which we *do* desire.

We learn something very insightful from this Rashi. It seems that a craving and an aversion – both diametrically opposite feelings – can exist for the very same thing. To each of these people, their feeling was tangible and real, and telling them otherwise would have been an exercise in vain.

Similarly, you might find a couple completely disagreeing on the very same thing. For example, one of them might find a roller coaster terrifying, while the other might find it absolutely thrilling. One of them might be afraid of speaking to the landlord, while for the other one it's not a big deal at all. The last thing we should do is deride them for having a different opinion, or make them feel bad or flawed for having those thoughts.

Don't say, "Ugh! Another one of your phobias!" or "You're so difficult! Why is everything such a big deal to you?!" Those statements tend to escalate the situation and turn it into a conflict.

We must realize that when other people experience a feeling it is very real to them even if it is completely foreign to us. When they gather the courage to share it with us, we must hear them out and empathize with them.

The Art of Listening

Moshe Rabbeinu, who was the humblest man alive, told the Nesi'im and elders of the nation that "*Anything that is too hard for you, bring to me and I'll listen to them.*" It seems odd that someone who was as humble as Moshe would make such a seemingly arrogant statement. But if we look closely at the words, we will note that Moshe didn't say, "Bring it on! I have the answer to all your impossible problems!" What he said was, "Bring them to me and *I will hear them out*".

So many times, we find our spouse bringing up the same thing over and over again, until we become annoyed. "How many times are we going to discuss the same topic?!" Actually, I can tell you how many times: Until you stop trying to explain to them that their concern is invalid and their fears are irrational. The moment you say, "Wow,

that must be so hard," or, "I understand your concerns," the problem may very well magically vanish.

You don't have to take ownership of the problem or set out on an expedition to find the perfect solution. Just remember that your job is to listen and make them feel respected and heard.

Rabbi Dr. Abraham J. Twerski tells of a note he held inside his office desk that said, "Remember! The patient is at the other side of the desk." If you feel yourself getting swept along with your spouse's emotions or you get overwhelmed by them, just take a breath. You don't have to solve this, fix this, or carry this. All you need to do is listen and show your steadfast support.

Chinuch: Real to Them

When kids come to us with their seemingly silly childish phobias, it's so easy to just laugh it off and tell them not to worry. We're so much older, we see the big picture, and we know that their concerns are unnecessary.

We might not realize how hurtful that can be to a child. To them, their concerns are big and real and very, very scary. When they see their parent laugh at it, it makes them feel stupid and unheard. It might even discourage them from sharing their deepest thoughts with us ever again, and that is not something we want.

Instead, listen to their worries, make them feel heard, and calm down their fears to the best of your ability. Keep in mind that when you were their age, these things may have been important to you as well.



Q&A



Please feel free to send any questions, on this topic or any topic to RabbiGruen@Lehair.org

Question:

I don't like my wife's attitude. What can I say to her that will make her change it for the better?

Answer:

When you tell a person, "I don't like your 'attitude'", even if they do know exactly what you mean, it's easy to dismiss the criticism. Additionally, it's not something that you can "make them change". It's a general demeanor that you can't switch on or off, especially not based on other people's wishes.

A much more effective approach would be if you can specify one or two specific things where you see her negative attitude manifest itself and bring it to her attention. It will not make her feel like you dislike her entire persona, and it will also give her something tangible to work on.

The upside to that is that a person's attitude is influenced by his actions (Mesillas Yesharim 7). That means that once she will do the things you ask of her, such as say thank you or hang up the phone when you come home, it can have an impact on her general demeanor. Don't forget to acknowledge and compliment the changes you see in her and let her know how much you appreciate it. You may very well notice that other little problems that have been bothering you will become resolved as well.

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